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EPA finishes asbestos testing at Stimson Lumber in Libby

LIBBY (AP) - The Environmental Protection Agency has finished testing a timber mill here for asbestos, the contaminant linked to the deaths of at least 200 town residents.

As the agency's cleanup effort expands, it has found at least 150 contaminated homes. At least another 700 homeowners have asbestos contamination in their yards.

Since 1999, the agency has been removing asbestos from its source - the former W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite screening plant - and expects to have that cleanup effort completed by the end of the year, the EPA's Duc Nguyen told the Libby Community Advisory Group.

Nguyen said results from tests completed Friday at the Stimson Lumber mill will be shared with the firm before being released to the public.

Ambient air and dust samples were collected at the finger jointer, the plywood

plant, the log yard and the central maintenance building, he said.

Community leaders said a closed road needs to be reclaimed and opened so that timber from a Forest Service sale can be harvested to feed the mill.

"That's wood for the mill and jobs for the community and can't be done until that road is fixed," said Lincoln County Commissioner Rita Windom.

The EPA also is working with Burlington Northern Santa Fe on the cleanup of its railway through Libby. The agency received a work plan from the railroad Sept. 9 and is reviewing it with the intention of getting the cleanup done this year, Nguyen said.

The EPA's goal is to have 50 to 60 of the contaminated homes cleaned up by the end of the year by four to six cleanup teams, Nguyen said. The majority of the restoration work following cleanup will be contracted locally, he said.